

Sunday, 4 December 2022  
The Second Sunday of Advent  
Isaiah 11.1-10; Gospel of Matthew 3.1-12  
The Rev'd Dr Mariama Ifode-Blease  
**'Transformation is within our grasp'**

**May I speak in the name of the triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.  
Amen.**

Things are starting to get interesting. England is in the knockout stages of the World Cup, though Senegal awaits us this afternoon. As Christians in the UK, we are now a minority religion, returning to our roots and developmental history. Some people are starting to realise that the question 'where are you from?' isn't really about where I am from but rather is asking 'why and how did I get here?'. And John the Baptist, a no-holds barred, what-you-see-is-what-you-get, unadulterated, courageous, I-see-you-better-than-you-can-see-yourself, kind of prophet, has landed on the scene. This is Advent, and things are starting to get interesting. Transformation is within our grasp.

The interest of God in us is often matched by our disinterest in God, and our focus on earthly power structures, self-positioning and status creation. We want followers, we want to matter, and we want people to know that we are relevant. These are both individual and collective pursuits. The readings today, however, offer us a different vision. We meet John the Baptist, heralding a messiah that is more in the model of Elijah than of the Jesus Christ we have come to know and, hopefully, love. Yet we cannot see John the Baptist without seeing Elijah, the totally uncompromising and miracle-working prophet of the Hebrew Bible, who predicted drought, confronted Jezebel, destroyed the false prophets of Baal and raised the son of a widow from the dead. It is fair to say that Elijah is one of my *absolute faves*. It is when God displays the power of the divine with fire from Mount Camel in Kings 18, that we hear the exclamation from the witnesses who finally believe in verse 39, the proclamation that holds both our readings today and the two prophets, Elijah and John the Baptist, in space and time: "The Lord indeed is God; the Lord indeed is God." Or as the King James Version translates it: "The LORD, He is God! The LORD, He is God!" (1 Kings 18: 39).

This extraordinary phrase, *HaShem Hu HaElohim*, is repeated seven times at the end of Yom Kippur, the Jewish Day of Atonement "the most sacred and solemn day in the Jewish calendar. Yom Kippur is a day to reflect on the past year and ask God's forgiveness for any sins."<sup>1</sup> This phrase is also "one of the last lines to be said when people are on their death bed."<sup>2</sup> *HaShem Hu HaElohim* holds within it expectation and reality. The power and mystery

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/topics/znwhfg8/articles/z4vvjhw>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/b038482y>

of the phrase can easily translate to our relationship between time and eternity, between agency and purpose. As one scholar writes, this phrase The Lord indeed is God; the Lord indeed is God, *HaShem Hu HaElohim* tells us that “we need to learn to see beyond the limited focus of physical eyes and recognize the soul within the body. This is true of how we must interact with one another, and this is equally true of how we interact with Heaven. Religious mythologies of separation must be delegated to the bookshelf of children's stories where they belong. Instead, we must focus on true and actual spiritual accomplishment and not just on philosophical religious rituals that look good on the surface, but are actually empty inside. Only we can make the difference when we say God is God”.<sup>3</sup> Things are starting to get interesting. Transformation is within our grasp.

As with Elijah, so it is with Isaiah. Transformation is neither neat nor tidy, peaceful nor uncomplicated. The presentation of a peaceful kingdom is held and made possible by this shoot, rooted in Hebrew ancestry:

His delight shall be in the fear of the LORD.  
He shall not judge by what his eyes see,  
or decide by what his ears hear;  
but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,  
and decide with equity for the meek of the earth;  
he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth,  
and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked (Isaiah 11:3-4).

Death is here, and so is life. Both are intertwined in the promise of a better life and a better time. We see that the God of the peoples of the Ancient Near East is offering something tantalising, something that we cannot yet grasp or see, something that we could not possibly create on our own, but with the help of God we will. Things are starting to get interesting, not because God is going to come with fire and strike down all evil and horror. Things are interesting because during Advent we begin our pilgrimage of remembering, of expectation, of realisation that, at its end, the tongues of fire of Pentecost will affirm the interest of God to remain with us. At this point and moment in the year, there is the clarity of our call that transformation is within our grasp.

It's not all fun and games, however. The equity presented in Isaiah comes at a price that some people are not prepared to pay. Equity comes at the price of self-education, and increase social awareness, a fair distribution of opportunity and access to all kinds of equal provision. Equity comes at the price of cultural sensitivity and understanding that the sun has set on the British Empire and where I am from is not as important as why there was Empire in the first place. Yet even here, the transformation of the lived reality of this historic legacy remains within our grasp.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.yeshshem.com/kabbalah-tishrai-holidays-god-is-god.htm#:~:text=One%20of%20the%20great%20proclamations%20made%20at%20the,all%20the%20other%20world%20religions%20and%20their%20gods.>

Before you had to endure my preaching and presence as one of your priests here at St James's, I worked for about fifteen years in retail, in part-time roles to support my studies for most of my teens and almost all of my twenties. My first role was after my GCSEs in the Mothercare store in Brent Cross, watching parents chasing their little ones across the store and supporting others with fitting shoes on children who frankly found the whole experience a colossal waste of their valuable time. While I was at university, I worked in a rather exclusive golf and cashmere shop. A well-heeled older lady came in and said that she would like the trousers in the window. There were several trousers in the window, so I asked which ones. She gestured towards them and said those ones in the "N brown". In the "N brown," she said. She had used the N word. I didn't say much; I was upset and left the shop floor. My rather ditzy and unsympathetic boss at the time later came to me upset in the staff room. My boss said that she didn't understand why I was upset, that it was just a description of a colour, and that this lady was clearly elderly and didn't mean anything offensive by it. Transformation was within my boss's grasp, and she let it slip through her fingers.

When do we start making the path clear and straight for the kind of transformative change that we want to see in society? Because path clearing begins with education, and attitudinal realignment, and truth-telling, and calling things out. I share some of my story with you not for pity, but to support the fact that *we need to work together* to live out the legacy of John the Baptist. Transformation may not be, for some of us, what we *actually want*, but it still remains within our grasp.

The second Sunday of Advent is traditionally about the prophets, a focus on them, a realisation that we are in their shadow, and that we are also in their story, and they are in ours; it's about a heightened awareness of the sharp realities of what it means to have a prophetic voice in our time:

Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire (Matthew 3: 10).

The Gospel speaks of more death and more decay, it seems. So perhaps it is fitting that the data from the 2021 census released this past week revealed that "England and Wales are now minority Christian countries, according to the 2021 census...It is the first time in a census of England and Wales that fewer than half of the population have described themselves as Christian".<sup>4</sup>

The census figures can be read in many ways, but they do of course highlight the inefficiency of the strategies for church growth. So much for suspect focus on bums-on seats initiatives and church planting. People do not want to join our party, not because we don't have the

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2022/nov/29/leicester-and-birmingham-are-uk-first-minority-majority-cities-census-reveals>

right food, *because we do*, but rather because we say at the door, you don't look right, you don't talk right, you don't love right, so this party is not for you. There has to be a whole lot of chopping and pruning before we get to the dancing and feasting. If I wasn't a Christian from the womb, I too would struggle to join a church that has been so woeful on protecting and promoting human rights, equity, personhood and human dignity for all. Transformation remains within our grasp, and we have to want to grasp it.

From the prefiguring of Jesus in the condemnation of the Pharisees and Saducees, we hear the journey from death to life in John the Baptist's words:

I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing-fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing-floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire" (Matthew 3:11-12).

We must recognise the work ahead, the affirmation received in baptism and at Pentecost to turn this world upside down so that we can begin something new. We are here to make life out of death and decay, to bring the Spirit of God into places and spaces where it has not been allowed to take root, to create a world in which children do not live in, and die because of, mould-ridden flats, and in which two-year old Awaab Ishak's death is not in vain:

The wolf shall live with the lamb...

The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,  
and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.

They will not hurt or destroy  
on all my holy mountain;

for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD (Isaiah 6;9).

This is both the journey and the destination. *HaShem Hu HaElohim*. The Lord indeed is God; the Lord indeed is God. We are called to be a part of this renewal of creation.

Transformation is within our grasp. We have work to do.

**Amen.**